

# BOOKS AS TRANSMITTERS OF CATALAN CULTURE



MISSAL DE SANTA EULÀLIA, 1403

© ARXIU DE LA CATEDRAL DE BARCELONA

WRITING AND BOOKS ARE THE BASIC SUPPORT OF CULTURE, THE INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDED TO MAINTAIN IT, GIVE IT LIFE AND MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE TO ALL. CATALONIA, WITH HER BOOKS, HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE TRANSMISSION OF HER CULTURE TO UNIVERSAL CULTURE.

ANSCARI M. MUNDÓ DIRECTOR, BIBLIOTECA DE CATALUNYA



**H**uman creative thinking has always felt the need for transmission, first orally, and then, in a more developed phase, in writing. The oldest and best example of this process for the material fixation of thought is the book. In some ways, we can say that writing and books are a culture's basic supports, the infrastructure needed to maintain it, give it life and make it accessible to all.

It is difficult to distinguish between the book, the written work and the author. For this reason, I shall try to give a condensed view of the overall harmonious development of all three components.

Like any cultured country, Catalonia can offer its own history of books, both from the point of view of literary, scientific and spiritual creation, and from the artistic point of view; in terms both of publishing and of the bibliophile who looks after his books with loving care. The oldest evidence of books in Catalonia comes from the Roman noble Flavius Julius Trifonian Sabinus, a private teacher of what we would now call literature, who in 402, at the age of thirty, revised a codex of the Satires of Persius in Barcelona. No doubt as a result of his military career, which took him to Tolo-

sa, he continued his revision of the codex there. Our first bibliographic witness is also the forerunner of Catalan literature's expansionist tendency. The Arab invasion, which came to Catalonia later than Spain, led to another expansion—or rather dispersion—of Catalan books. Pròsper, the archbishop of Tarragona, fled by sea with one of the most highly valued Visigothic codices in existence. The bishop of Urgell, Nambad, while escaping the persecution of Munussa, was caught in Llívia in 725 and burnt at the stake. His clergy managed to escape, taking two highly valued codices with them to Burgundy, where they are still preserved today.

With the reconquest at the end of the 8th century, Catalonia opened itself decidedly to Europe. The production of books generally took place in ecclesiastical centres. The writing-rooms of Ripoll and Vic are famous for the codices of texts which are as varied as they are well illustrated. One need remember no more than the two great Bibles of Ripoll (now in the Vatican Library and the National Library in Paris), the most profusely illustrated in Europe around the year 1000. We must not forget other

writing rooms which were active between the 9th and 15th centuries, such as those of Urgell, Girona, Barcelona, Tortosa, Montserrat or Sant Cugat del Vallès. In the middle of the 10th century, the last of these was producing liturgical codices which it exported abroad. In about 1010 there was a transcription workshop in Barcelona which supplied the judges and juridical organisations; and in 1403 Rafael Destorrents produced a miniature for his cathedral of the Missal de Santa Eulàlia, one of the best artistic examples of Catalan books. Of our great writers, Ramon Llull and Arnau de Vilanova, whose literary activity was as profuse as it was influential in European thinking until after the 13th century, when they were born, a few hundred manuscript books have survived, and many illustrated editions by Llull all over Europe.

The first book to be printed in Catalonia was the Barcelona incunabulum of 1473 with works by Aristotle. In 1490 *Tirant lo Blanc*, by Joanot Martorell (d. 1468), came off the presses, somewhere between the books of chivalry and an action novel impregnated with gentle sensuality, which Cervantes described, in *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, as "the best book in the world". In fact the book has recently become an international best-seller.

Popular books for practical use and legal texts are not missing from the international expansion of Catalan books. A good example of the former is the *Vocabulari català-alemany* and vice versa, printed in Perpignan in 1502. Undoubtedly the best-known legal text is the famous *Consolat del Mar*, a code of maritime law drawn up in Barcelona in



the 13th century and later adopted and translated by a number of seafaring nations of Europe, up until the last century. The *Constitucions e altres drets de Catalunya*, apart from many manuscript copies, has seen a number of editions, spaced out between 1495 and 1702, which deserve an honourable mention amongst Catalan books for the importance and extent of the work and the dignity of the illustrations.

Jacint Verdaguer (1845-1902) is probably the first modern Catalan writer whose extensive literary work has contributed to the large-scale promotion of Catalan books. Translations into every modern language, printed in editions of all kinds, popular, paperback, bibliophile or carefully illustrated, are proof of this.

One must not forget that Catalan publishing activity so far this century has been proportionately greater than that of other European cultural areas. Books published in Catalonia have not only invaded the Hispanic market, but have also crossed the sea to Central and South America; without forgetting that Central and Northern European countries have some of their commercial illustrated books printed in Catalonia, especially those intended for children. In speaking of de luxe editions, it would be well to mention in passing certain world-famous Catalan illustrators. We have to remember the versatile Picasso, whose artistic training took place in Catalonia, and certainly his companion, Pau Roig (1897-1955), an exquisite illustrator of books of some renown in France.

But the greatest Catalan exponents of the illustrated book in all its techniques and with an incomparable artistic strength have undoubtedly been Joan Miró (1893-1983) and Salvador Dalí (1904-1989). The international recognition their illustrated books have received comes as no surprise.

There is another aspect of Catalan book production which should not be left out, which is the binding. Master Emili Bruguera (1901-1987) has probably developed this aspect more than anyone else. The exquisite art and the technical perfection of his binding have been recognised by the most demanding bibliophiles and libraries in our country and abroad.

So, although it is a small country, Catalonia's books have also contributed to universal literature. ●